

At 34 mph, doors suddenly opened on car of packed Metra train



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If their morning coffee didn't already have them wide awake, Metra BNSF riders were given a brief jolt of adrenaline when doors in one car on a packed express train between Naperville and the Loop suddenly opened last month.

No one was hurt, and the doors quickly closed on their own.

But it was the second time in recent years there's been a problem with open doors on the BNSF line, which stretches between Aurora and Chicago's Union Station and is Metra's busiest route and one of its most delay-prone. In 2013, a train heading from the city to the west suburbs ran roughly 10 minutes with a door open, apparently because of an ice build-up, according to news reports at the time.

This time, the doors sprung open with people in the vestibule and the train going around 34 miles an hour as it geared up leaving the Naperville station towards its top speed of around 70 mph.

"It was a problem with what's called the door relay, which is a component in the electrical circuit that controls the doors," according to Metra spokesman Michael Gillis, who said a piece was "worn."

Metra said workers "determined the cause of the electrical glitch to be an intermittent failure of one of the parts of the electrical circuit that controls the train doors. This failure is extremely rare and was fixed immediately. We take this incident very seriously and sincerely apologize to our customers who may have been frightened by this incident."

Told what happened, Joseph Szabo, a onetime Metra conductor who was chief of the Federal Railroad Administration under President Barack Obama, said: "I'm not aware of past cases like this — opening en route. That'd be a little bit concerning, where you have a rush hour. Then, with people standing in the vestibule, the risk is enhanced."

It happened just after 8 a.m. Feb. 15 as the train left Naperville, the third station from the end of the line, on an express run to downtown, according to Gillis. The door "opened, then closed," he said.

Metra conductors didn't see it, Gillis said. But later a rider called the commuter rail agency to report what happened and said about 15 people were nearby when the doors opened.

"The caller said there were people standing in the vestibule," Gillis said.

Crews from BNSF, the Texas railroad that contracts with Metra to operate the route, checked things out, confirmed the problem and fixed it, Gillis said.

The train "hadn't built up to top speed yet," he said, adding, "We're not aware of this happening before in recent months."

Andy Williams, a spokesman for BNSF, said, "This was an isolated incident caused by a mechanical issue. The door was open for three seconds. It was repaired immediately. The train was traveling at approximately 34 mph. We are not aware of any other issues."

The cabs of Metra locomotives have lights to indicate when doors are open. Asked whether a light flagged the train's engineer that there was an open door, Williams said, "The indicator light would have gone off for three seconds — the amount of time the door was open. It is reasonable to believe that the engineer was busy watching the tracks and didn't see the light during that three seconds."

Bob Guy, the state legislative director for SMART Transportation Division, the union that represents many Metra

crew members, said that when engineers are pulling out of a station they're often focused on "the track ahead." A door light "can be easily overlooked," Guy said.



Metra's Naperville station. | Robert Herguth / Sun-Times

FRA spokesman Marc Willis said the incident didn't "meet our threshold for reporting requirements," so the federal agency isn't investigating.

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